

re-present

Undergraduate Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in
English in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Ellis Hieronymous Gibson

The Ohio State University

December 2019

Project Advisor: Professor Kathy Fagan Grandinetti, Department of English

Table of Contents

Alone	3
lacking	4
Portrait of Woman Walking Back and Forth	5
i'm stared at in public places	6
Backstroke	7
For the Hens	8
Replies	9
music for driving home with death	11
Beowulf reconsiders	12
autopoiesis	13
To a Goose of the Wexner Center for the Arts	15
relapsing	16
Grendel considers	17
back the way i came	18
excreted poem	19
re-present	20
Alone again	22

Alone

I saw the long gold beams, slow-gliding from the sun.
The light struck many black birds, soaring.
They knew how to be together.

Then one sung, cradled in the dense branches, for all of them.
This is what the sky was made for.

I think a person can be reborn.

lacking

when i lift weights monstrous
beowulf flexes encouragement,
sweats on the mat. we are gym buddies,
contending with the physical.
i strain through the motion
aiming for relief
without relief. i am told
to struggle my blood further.
beowulf says the joy is in extremes.
grendel, lurking, wants to interrupt. he'd say
let go. put your mouth here, bear. my chest
is a sluggish pump. feel it, a dense stone, a mud pit,
greedy. nothing satisfies a body anymore.

Portrait of Woman Walking Back and Forth

My voice is a stranger
crossing the street.

A path instantiates
direction: call it what it isn't,
a gender. A brief cloud

alights on a baby, two birds
fight in a wide alley, a car
crushes dead plastic wrap,

and I am born squalling
two minutes ago.
Trash wheels on the wind.

Colliding in the ocean,
on the sides of roads, masses
of bodies conglomerate.

I too am several, turning
ceaselessly on their chain.

i'm stared at in public places

bus seatmates waiting to arrive:

thoughtful, reflecting, she calls me *sister*, then *brother*, *hey*—

her eyes make me alive.

i die when she looks away.

so if i die, if i die on this hill

let me do it drinking my fill, re-

made in face paint,

needle pricks, astringents,

the succ-

or of glass-thin syringes, get me?

get me, not this transcending body.

or get my face:

though, face it, you see what you want in me,

a rancid beauty,

and in mirrors i see nothing but eyes

riding wet glass chunks or

sliding on panes—

i'm reborn blinking between

sink-thrown spit stains.

brother?

sister?

eyes aim for mirrors,

but hit me

and i, queer

glass sculpture, reflect in pieces,

redirect.

Backstroke

Airport at night, the first time
I travelled alone, I dreamed in the lobby

seats, bent to their shape, almost already
flying. Travelers filtered out,

impurities from water. Down went the shutters,
the grates fluting like gills. A figure went by,

cleaning the floor. Now there was no one
but me. Earlier when I had cried

in front of the ticket agents, my flight
closed for boarding and I ten minutes late,

they felt sorry for me, called me young man
despite my breasts, despite the smudging

of my eyeliner. They laughed and helped me change
the ticket for a four a.m. flight between us,

a surreptitious hand-over like ibuprofen during class.
I'd panicked, but now there was nothing but tears

and sweat. Emptied, I let the women commiserate.
One, clutching her stomach, said I'd never

understand what *that* red misery was like, thank God.
I did not correct her, though I remembered leaving history

to wince in the bathroom, struggling not to vomit
up vestigial pain like bloody choke-foam.

Airport at night, I swam to the men's restroom,
a secret fish, and saw a cockroach skitter

across the gleaming floor, the same as anywhere.

For the Hens

Hens peck the ground, kick
their feet, stride around
wobble-wattled, bright-eyed,
proud and prim. I love them
all; I admire one, who,
in a snit, hits wing-tips
against her sister, pecks
a bloody feather off,
leaves mottled gray skin bare,
and blinks yellow, pleased. Struts
in the fence don't keep me
out -- but when I'm seen, they
scatter and flee. My trick
is easing round the side
where bushes cast shadows
and leaning there, teeth sharp
as rooster spurs, until
I'm sure. Then straight for them.
The birds craft their eggs, bide
their broody time to hatch
the chicks, and I've bided
too, let hunger scratch down
my throat, fed my children
on thin milk, crept at night
to scout near the henhouse.
Light hours: harder to hide,
but the girls are outside,
the chance is mine. I want
to kiss their necks, loving
where the farmer's fist chokes.
I am a mother,
therefore twice the fox. Know
as I do: blood's meant to
bleed, hens to feed on wheat.
My mouth is not for love stories
but to open up and eat.

Replies

I.

Do you know yourself?

Myself,

my sister. I have her

my footprints;

they glance mind like water-
spiders dancing on surface tension.

I know her

my eyes;

dead marbles clinking in a tin box.

I remember

skin-scrap,

unformed pieces.

A child laugh.

Teeth, bared.

The stirs of fear

and fascination, like the skirts

of conifers in wind.

II.

Do you know yourself?

I'm told I was a happy baby

laughed plenty before I learned to rage

at my clipped mouth or

the space between my finger-

tips and the thought of the fingers

I wasn't long to find the art of skin-

ning myself as I was born dead

skin and earth climbed out and stole

my own sheath a seal-maid contracted

to live landbound and give birth to herself

III.

Do you know yourself, self?

I chose my name

from a grasp of stones

rattling in my finger catch,

plucked my feather

out my gray chicken skin

in pitiless auspicy —

only gave me

a few seconds looking

clear through dapple veils

of sealskin
to see her
and me
diverging like needles
cast in falling green
among the roots.
I let go smiling

of the self that was,
I am gathered
like bright-blown
joyful
glass.
I brave
new water-
mirrors. I wonder,
though, if her face
peeks through mine
like a robin through leaves.
I cannot begrudge her this;
it feels right
to give the future to
even the dead
children.

music for driving home with death

let the earth hold the wealth of earls
gold in the ground where it yet lies
as useless to us now as ever it was

guitar & radio snap / knock
 a little slice of sparks
 rendered to rain / above
 weight collects in crimps
 of water-dust / and stones / and drops
 and marbled meat packed
 and blued in butcher paper

how far a rack
 of heaven aches
 an eye / on a long drive
 sky's a highway / gray
 and carceral
 clanking / smoke
 from horse-furnaces
 juddering / singing
 my destination / i drag
 thoughts out

and guttering strings smack
 over orchestra / oil slicks
 an end / layers
 in charcoal / names
 our uncovering
 in drowning / in soil
 not to be overturned

Beowulf reconsiders

Their bellies touched together when they fought
 he & the bee-wolf. Bear had zir arms
 under the dense shoulder drove zir hips down
 to crush the monster— he bucked under the crash.
 They yet remembered those two fine wrestlers
 once youngsters, underage & yearning for men's arms,
 now knew well the ways of mead of matters of honor, & of dealing death.

The air after the bout was a blade of ice.
 The scummy lake water did it lick away Wealhtheow's
 pin-tip fingers from the honeyed throat of mead-cups
 paid by coffers of the dead or Hrothgar's knife-prick under leather,
 or the death of Grendel climbing by arm, intestine, face?
 He was not ugly was he?
 Tho blood swelled the heads the hair of men in Grendel's paw.

Bear swore to beat him save the hall of Spear-Danes
 & then to stop his mother as if to ask the price of her son's hand
 on zir thigh— skin thinnest there—
 ze lets the mud mark steps.
 The lake bites zir belly.
 Cold water climbs.

autopoiesis

the work of a stepward
 self itself inlaid
 by works of names:
 you work two limbs,
 opening in the staircase,
 itself the stem of the butterfly
 of the brain of a man asleep
 with the dream of a woman's
 sleeve tucking away the word
 for man, for stair
 for kiss, for butterfly
 for self, for poem.

you open in the staircase
 for the kiss of a woman.
 the dream is in the stem
 of a poem, the steps
 inlaid by self. the steppe
 is filled with butterflies.
 wonder their works,
 unlimb their words,
 ward the name
 of the self
 with the lace's stare.

the stem of the brain
 where asleeping wo/man,
 tucking the sleeve
 like a butterfly,
 is laid. work is the word
 for the opening
 where the self kiss
 the step of the staircase
 to your inward name.

tucking the limb
 is a kiss.

the poem's stem
is your breast
inlaid, unnamed,
if a man is a woman.
encased on the stair,

if a woman is a man,
the sleeping self
of your butterfly
whirls
the liminal word.

you kiss
to your dream a self,
a work,

unsleeving the name.

To a Goose of the Wexner Center for the Arts

Last winter I saw you loitering by the stands of brick-red tile
and photographed you, learning your trowel beak dip on your black beckoning throat;
and your gray feet, one bent questioning;
and the shudder of your voice, brassy and inconsiderate.
You must have seen ten people go past every hour, a hundred, a thousand —
you hissed at me anyway, paced forward and back, grey shoulders hunching and smoothing.
In spring you and your double grumbled, placking your feet and ushering a line
of yellow-black burrs. I could not count them. They toddled, bunched and hurried.
You led them across the red and concrete into a lawn of alien grass,
past university brickwork, and through campus, all while lecturing.
Now the winter dies again and you make four, two on the roof calling didactically,
two among Wexner's plains-grass planters. You or your partner
dart the long neck against the art center's glass wall
where goose-shadow boasts, the other watching with black pedantic eye.
You do not remember me. I am like all the other students of these years,
I am flat-faced and inconsequential. Who could tell us apart?
We die off like shed molt. I try to memorize the beautiful matte
feathers, white pillowed belly shading to black tips, prow-body,
loom-body ready to craft the air. You watch me tipping in my squat, one hand
scraped on the dismissal of straw. My back is heavy with papers, books,
allegiance. I am no bird. I see you know your way in the air,
though I have not yet learned the lesson.

relapsing

the grass leers side the road veer knowing i have touched before
knowing i ate leaves in the green knowing i dared fruit + worm
in the pineappleweed in the wild onion after school at the field
beyond the jewish community center was there really a spring there
or a field? i do not know but tho i forgot the boys names a girl
taught me how to eat an apple a hard boiled egg in the grass
grass watching inscribing me for the years i would unlearn
+ now feel the eye of yellow flowerheads springing like wheat

Grendel considers

dear lover will you still
love me tho i am proof of sin
+ sorrow + accident + malice +
i killed men + took them away in a bag
i arm wrestled with thanes
i went about being ugly
like a fleck of red spittle
landing on a cheek
time stretched + belled
i stood + hollered
unanswered but cursed by god
this was my one joy
at least i could spit
blood venom: fuck you,
god, you were never there for me either,
not when i really needed you--
+ my back aches from throwing
knobby elbows over my shoulder, night
upon night. + the wind
is too loud + i hear screams
in it. they are my own peals
falling away. i think the sea
is bucking your voice to me
+ you are saying
something i can't make out.
i can't find the edge
of this moment
though i am grappling for it.
love, if you come to me
making reins of the waves
maybe there will be
forgiveness at the end

back the way i came

i think these days
fittingly in starts
and fits, remitting—
a symptom
of having enough
to let go, release
the grace of being unafraid.

my hands were fish
greedy for emptiness.
when the body is
a forgotten trunk,
fear falls away, like orange peel
from the knife's edge—
everything is the knife's edge.

i think i am disgracing,
i am left nude.
a body takes its own shape,
it hungers for space.
and i dream of beowulf again:
the low fire in the low hall,
the breast a bank of fear.

old english is slippery,
the words are not ours.
these goldfish jump
out of my hands,
become fiery trout, swimming
in the leak of year-days.

i cannot
put the story
back together. its torn
peel scenting my fingers,
fear is my piecemeal—
i greet it nakedly.

excreted poem

this is not a gleaming light
after
choosing not to die
wretchedly
i am not excused
from wretchedness to write

the bowels are the first
sign of process
through the motion of a bite
call it progress:
the worm eating
the king goes on
fighting an irritable
stomach for several
months to a year

+ i go on
with my gripes hoping
it is better to be alive

re-present

i want history
straddling and coaxing
my clay hips,
hot working
my forge,
drawing out cicada
shell reversed.

in search of a body
of trust, i pick
the tale apart in fragment,
by etym and nucleus,
electric shell.
i make myself road
of word. i must
rebear it, cut
the pain open,
a bird's egg.

hatching
from the thrust
of my grinding blade,
monster-fables glimmer
in memorial:
strife is loss
of time, scratched by sea
to nothing, nothing
but the buried gold.

remembering
throws off mourning
sparks of sun.
my shoulder
bone would be
a story too
if i could spit it up.

am i there in the lick
of a polished tongue
turned back?
if i live
this again, i'll find
myself stillborn,
or know myself, bending
to the lip of monster.

Alone again

Walking encircles the body. Awaken the field.
Before the famine my marrow wished
to rise to feast a happy sparrow!

Dark gold in wheat, my harvest. Yield.
Awaken circles mark the wing
a joyful dance to sing to eat!